Consent, outrage, and the abduction of Rumeysa Ozturk

The philosophies of Gilles Deleuze and Fred Rogers are helping me make sense of the shameful footage.

by David Dault
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Century illustration (Source images: Getty)

Around ten years ago, I had the chance to interview Saadia Faruqi on the radio. She had just come out with her first book of short stories, *Brick Walls: Tales of Hope and Courage from Pakistan.* I really enjoyed both the book and the conversation. A couple of months later I was at a reception at a religion conference, and Saadia approached me, said hello, and thanked me again for the interview. I was so excited

to meet her in person, I reached out, took her hand, and shook it warmly.

Many observant Muslim women do not touch non-Muslim men. I vaguely knew that, but my brain did not catch up in time. It was one of those awkward moments when good intentions go awry. I was completely in the wrong but didn't realize it until after the mistake was complete. I meant to offer her hospitality and welcome, but my intentions really don't matter. What I did made her very uncomfortable. I immediately apologized. Saadia was very gracious.

It was a moment I have never forgotten: How quickly a line can be crossed, how quickly things can go from hospitality to inhospitality, and the irreducible importance of consent.

When we were still quite new to being parents, my wife Kira and I made another sort of awkward choice. As our Irish twins made their transition from helpless infants to little folks with wills of their own, we committed to becoming a "full consent" household. That meant that as soon as the kids were old enough to be able to tell us their preferences, we stopped touching them without getting their permission first. That meant no hugs, no wardrobe adjustments, no contact at all, unless we asked first and received positive consent.

I call this an awkward choice because it ran counter to the expectations of every adult in our children's lives, including our own as their parents. Kira and I had to unlearn a whole host of assumptions about the physical boundaries of our kids and who had the right to cross them. The most awkward part was enforcing those boundaries with enthusiastic relatives, or even with ourselves—because the two of us often forgot, especially in the early days.

Over time, though, it made a difference. Reminding the kids, and reminding ourselves, that "we never touch without asking first, and getting consent" gave Kira and me a framework that helped us navigate a great number of situations at school and on the playground. Space—both social space and physical space—arranges differently when full consent is a factor. The presence of consent provides positive structures that enable us to choose paths that will not devolve into violence.

I had all of this in mind as I watched footage of the recent abduction of Tufts University doctoral student Rumeysa Ozturk. She was taken in broad daylight by unidentified assailants on a street near her home in Somerville, Massachusetts. She was on her way to join friends at an iftar dinner to break the Ramadan fast. She

never made it.

In the video, you see her in her puffy white coat, zipped up against the still-wintry chill of early spring. Above the collar, you can plainly see her head, covered by her hijab. Rumeysa Ozturk is a visibly observant Muslim woman. She's looking at her phone, passing idle time as she awaits her ride to dinner.

The first man to approach Ozturk on the street calls to her. Ozturk looks up in surprise, not fear. That quickly changes. A moment later, the man is directly in front of her. She makes a move to step back, and he grabs her.

When I watch that, something inside me twists. I think of Saadia Faruqi. I think of my children. I think of all the ways that what is happening in that moment is a violation. I think of how, in a country that claims to respect and protect religious liberties, a non-Muslim man feels at liberty to put his hands on a Muslim woman. I think of how, when she clearly protests, withdrawing any possible consent to what is happening, the man ignores her. And through it all, even as the camera angle makes it hard to see, I can't help feeling that I know how his face looks in that moment. I can't shake the feeling that, above all else, this man is enjoying himself.

I'm trained as a philosopher, so in moments like this, I turn to philosophy for help. I do this for two reasons. First, thinking carefully about a situation, using tools provided by other philosophers, can help me understand how we got into a bad situation. Second, sometimes tools and careful thinking can help you find your way to a path out of a bad situation or, if that is not possible, help you find your way to a path of increasing resistance. In this situation, I turn to two philosophers: Fred Rogers and Gilles Deleuze.

Rogers, the beloved children's television host, often said that anything human is mentionable, and anything mentionable is manageable. That is an especially helpful reminder in moments I know are designed to provoke fear. The abduction of Rumeysa Ozturk is such a moment. I remind myself that the forces that acted against her are not mysterious; they are human. The man who put his hands on Ozturk has a name. The threat he presents is human sized. If we some day learn his name, we may speak it aloud and tell him he should feel ashamed, just as I felt ashamed when I grabbed Faruqi's hand and shook it. Even if he and I believed, mistakenly, that we were reaching out toward the woman in the hijab for all the right reasons, that man was wrong, as I was wrong, to do what he did. The man in the

footage has a name, and I hope soon he will be called to repentance for the violation of Ozturk and to apologize and make amends. This is the tool Rogers gives me—to humanize and human-size this moment that I could too easily lose to terrifying monstrosity.

Deleuze takes me in a somewhat different direction. In 1990 he wrote a brief essay, “Postscript on the Societies of Control.” Building on the thought of Michel Foucault and William S. Burroughs, Deleuze asserts that our culture has experienced three major forms of societal arrangement over the past half millennium.

The first is *sovereignty*. The sovereign society is organized around a monarch, and the monarch for all intents *is* the state. *L’etat c’est moi.* So when a subject breaks a law, it is considered an offense against the monarch himself (it is usually a him), and “justice” in this context amounts to the king exacting revenge. In a sovereign society, the king will tax you, and there is always the chance the king will kill you, but otherwise, the monarch pretty much leaves you alone.

The second arrangement is *discipline.* In the disciplinary society, the monarch is replaced by the law. Where the sovereign society mainly regulated death, disciplinary structures are designed to regulate every aspect of your life. Hence we are encouraged—by the schools, clinics, and especially the prisons in our society—to be unfailingly scrupulous. A classic example of the disciplinary society might be East Germany during the last century or China in the present. Movement and agency are tightly monitored and controlled, and the ideal citizen is one who monitors *themself* and works hard to stay “normal.”

The final arrangement, according to Deleuze, is one we have only recently entered. A society of *control* is no longer so interested in restricting your physical movements. In fact, you are encouraged to move about, travel, and engage in commerce, because doing so generates more and more information. This information can be catalogued, mined, and sold. The restrictions in a society of control are not so much around movement as they are around access. Navigating the essentials of life requires having the right passwords, and submission to the conscription of algorithms. Instead of scrupulous self-monitoring, we are monitored by our ubiquitous machines: smart phones, smart watches, and AI. Our access to the means of life can be revoked at any time, often without any human making that decision. We become locked out of an app or a permission is revoked, and it can have all the effects of a prison, without anyone ever having to be caged.

I note these three arrangements from Deleuze's essay because the Trump administration is currently speed-running all of them at the same time. We have news reports that airstrikes are ordered and deportations run by an algorithmic process, like in a control society. The president and the chair of the joint chiefs of staff are not part of the decision process for our military maneuvers, and no evidence or due process is present as hundreds of legal residents and visa holders are being disappeared.

At the same time, our president dips into the exercise of sovereign power when he treats dissent like a personal affront and uses the podium to single out and name those he wishes for the government to attack. And all the while, as in a disciplinary society, the expectation we hear more and more from our government leaders is to stay in our place, to not speak out of turn, and to be willing to report our neighbors if we suspect they have stepped out of line.

The goal of this churning among the three arrangements seems designed to keep us in a state of fear. I have no doubt that Rumeysa Ozturk, when she was confronted and manhandled off the street and into that black SUV, was afraid. Moreover, I am afraid on her behalf.

But that is not my principal emotion. Rather, I feel shame and outrage. Watching the footage of Ozturk's abduction, I feel the way I imagine James Baldwin might have felt while writing his monumental essay "No Name in the Street." There, Baldwin recalled his own confrontation with an image, this one of the teenager Dorothy Counts.

Counts was the young African American woman who courageously attempted to enroll and integrate the segregated Jim Crow school system in South Carolina in the late 1950s. For that effort she was vilified, threatened, and spat upon by her White neighbors in the community.

A photographer snapped a picture at the height of the violence. Seeing that image of Dorothy Counts and recalling it some years later, Baldwin remarked:

> There was unutterable pride, tension, and anguish in that girl's face as she approached the halls of learning, with history, jeering, at her back. It made me furious, it filled me with both hatred and pity, and it made me ashamed. Some one of us should have been there with her!

When I watch the footage of the abduction of Ozturk, this is the phrase that stays with me: *Some one of us should have been there with her!* Been there to shield her. Been there to step into the fray and stand between her and the man with the hidden name who violated her rights.

As I think this, my mind is drawn to John 8, to the story often referred to as The Woman Caught in Adultery. You know the story. The authorities abduct a woman and manhandle her into the presence of Jesus. They accuse her of being caught in the act of adultery, and they seek to test Jesus by asking him whether or not she should be stoned to death.

Anything human can be named, and anything that can be named can be managed.

Jesus leans away from the catastrophic and humanizes the situation. He looks at the men and invites them to visit their own shame in the situation: “Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.” They respond by walking away, “one by one.”

In that moment, Jesus shields her. In refusing to abandon the woman to the grinding machinations of the law, he offers her a path forward that brings her back into the community rather than banishing her. He shifts the accusatory attention away from her by suddenly kneeling down and drawing doodles on the ground.

Here, Jesus points a way beyond the churning repetition of sovereignty, discipline, and control that confronts us in the story, that confronts us today in our present darkness. This churning repetition is designed to unsettle us, to make us think its origins are something more than human and therefore unnameable and unmanageable. It is designed to trap us in fear.

And yet here is the quiet voice of Jesus, reminding us, *Be not afraid*.

If we look to the horizon beyond the churning repetition of sovereignty, discipline, and control, what do we see? I’d like to think that what comes next, where Jesus is leading us to go, is a society of consent, where the violence embodied by that man who grabbed Rumeysa Ozturk might be interrupted at the source, instead of after the fact, as we are attempting to interrupt it now.

A truly Christian society—if indeed we as Americans ever were that or wished to be that—might hope to embody the words Jesus speaks to the woman, after all her

accusers have departed: “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?”

She replies, “No one, sir.”